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AMERICANS FOR SALE

The South Africa Lobby

KAREN ROTHMYER

One day in February 1974, six white South Africans gathered in the office of Prime Minister John Vorster to discuss what should be done to fight back against their country's growing international isolation. In addition to Vorster, the group included Gen. Hendrik van den Bergh, head of South Africa's Bureau of State Security (BOSS), and Information Minister Dr. Cornelius Mulder, the man touted as Vorster's successor.

The group had come together to hear from Mulder's hand-picked Secretary of Information, Eschel Rhoodie, how Rhoodie proposed to increase the effectiveness of his department. The urbane, 40-year-old Rhoodie was convinced after more than a dozen years abroad as an information officer that South Africa must go on a public relations offensive. As Rhoodie described the meeting last year in an interview with the *Rand Daily Mail*, he told Vorster and the others, "I want you to approve not an information asset but a propaganda war in which no rules or regulations would count." The plan, which Rhoodie claimed was inspired by Central Intelligence Agency contacts in the United States, was agreed to, and along with it, a secret fund to finance operations. By his own reckoning, Rhoodie, with the much-feared van den Bergh's assistance, orchestrated between 160 and 180 secret projects through 1978, at a cost approaching \$100 million.

There is no available count of how many of these projects involved the United States, but enough is known about them to indicate that this country was highly important—perhaps the most important of Rhoodie's targets. American operations ranged from wining and dining Congressmen to secret-

Karen Rothmyer is a freelance writer living in New York City. She formerly worked for the Africa Fund. Research for this article was funded by the Center for Investigative Reporting.

ly bankrolling the purchase of American newspapers, underwriting phony academic conferences and sponsoring golfing junkets for businessmen.

In the end, Rhoodie precipitated his own downfall. A slim, handsome man with a taste for Jaguars and customized executive jets, Rhoodie was at the least careless about accounting for his secret funds. Information about these irregularities—perhaps leaked by Mulder's political enemies—began to appear in the press in early 1978. A coverup ensued, with the result that in the end, Rhoodie, Mulder and Vorster were all driven from office (van den Bergh retired). Rhoodie fled to Europe, only to be extradited and convicted late last year on five counts of fraud. He is still appealing that sentence.

Independent interviews, together with South African and European press reports, tapes made by Rhoodie and the findings of a South African Government board of inquiry known as the Erasmus Commission show that Rhoodie was able to work his way with ease into some of the most powerful offices in America. Even allowing for Rhoodie's tendency to exaggerate (and possibly even invent) some of his successes, they also provide evidence that Rhoodie had no problem recruiting Americans to assist him in his efforts.

The story of John McGoff is a case in point. In 1974, at the time Rhoodie was winning approval for his secret operations, McGoff, a middle-aged Michigan publisher, was a frustrated would-be tycoon. The Panax newspaper chain which he headed, consisting of about forty small daily and weekly papers mainly in the Middle West, was losing money despite McGoff's acknowledged sales ability and his flair for self-advancement. Even the local Williamston, Michigan, voters didn't seem to appreciate McGoff's talents: they threw him off the school board in 1974 after he'd attacked everything from Federal support for school lunches to the local superintendent of schools.

But there was one place where McGoff, the name-dropping son of a Pittsburgh steelworker, was made to feel both welcome and important. As a result of having made the acquaintance of a South African information officer named L.E.S. de Villiers, McGoff was invited to South Africa in 1968. He found it much to his liking, and in time came to know Rhoodie, Mulder and even Vorster himself.

According to the Erasmus report, as well as an interview that Rhoodie gave to *Elseviers*, a Dutch magazine, last year,

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